

Landslide in Philippine mining community kills at least 36

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On January 4, at 3:30 in the morning, a section of Mount Diwalwal was dislodged by heavy rains, and a landslide of mud, clay, debris and tree roots buried fifty bunkhouses and many of the sleeping miners and their families. The tragedy occurred in the gold-rich Compostela Valley, on the southern island of Mindanao in the Philippines. Thirty-six people have so far been reported dead with many more still missing.

The landslide occurred in area 700, the gold mining area 700 meters above sea level. Mount Diwalwal contains the largest gold deposits in the Philippines and most of it is worked by small-scale mining.

The bunkhouses each contain a single toilet for all of the occupants. The walls are honey-combed with bunks, each six feet long by three feet high. The bunkhouses sits atop ball mills, where the ore collected in the mine is ground, and then mixed with mercury. The mercury fumes suffuse the bunkhouses and the run-off pollutes the water downstream. The ball mills operate incessantly, grinding rock and shaking the bunkhouses.

Gold was discovered at Mount Diwata in 1983. A gold rush ensued. Diwata became a wild-west of armalite-toting goons, shacks hastily constructed along steeply sloped roads of mud and raw sewage, and tens of thousands of workers engaged in back-breaking perilous labor. Diwata was renamed Diwalwal, a local word for working to the point of such exhaustion that your tongue hangs out of your mouth like a dog's.

When the gold was found most of the region was occupied by guerillas of the New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Army intelligence reports claimed that the gold constituted the single largest source of income for the CPP, both through the direct mining of the ore and through 'revolutionary taxes'

charged for the 'protection' of the miners. The army wanted a share of the action, and so did the police, and each sent several units to the mountain to begin mining.

For several years these groups mined Diwalwal and profited side-by-side. Each set up roadblocks to collect 'taxes' and prevent the entrance of rivals. Gun battles regularly broke out when one group encroached on another's turf.

The Army and police units sent to mine went rogue, refusing orders, not sending profits on to their superiors. They became known as the lost commands. Each commander established his own mining corporation. Three main corporations emerged: JB Mining, Blucor Mineral Resources and Helica Gold Company. The companies used their contacts in the army or the police to arm their thugs, who both fought off rivals and enforced work in the appalling labor conditions within the mines.

These mining corporations became multi-million dollar entities. Each had political protection from on high; Helica Gold, for instance, is intimately connected with Senator Panfilo 'Ping' Lacson, former head of the Philippine National Police.

The Philippine press universally depicts small-scale mining as the anarchic activity of petulant squatters, who individually dig holes in the ground looking for gold on the sides of Mount Diwalwal. Small-scale mining was defined during the Marcos administration and the definition refined under Corazon Aquino as activity that "relies heavily on manual labor, and is owned, managed, or controlled by an individual."

The occupants of the bunkhouses buried in the landslide worked in or around corporate mines, they or their family members were employed in these mines. They dug in the poorly constructed and unregulated tunnels, collected the washed off tailings, and held the

gold in the mercury baths, often with bare hands. Many of the workers are children as young as 11. Some of the victims of the landslide were reported to be three- or four-years old.

Massive multinational mining conglomerates have long desired to get their hands on the mines of Diwalwal. Former President Joseph Estrada is alleged to have had an interest in the ongoing small-scale mining of Diwalwal. When he was kicked out of office, one of the first initiatives of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was to declare a state of emergency in Diwalwal. She followed this up by issuing Proclamation 297 which made 8,100 hectares of Diwalwal a mineral reservation, and thus under the direct control of the government. Arroyo then established Natural Resources Development Corp to manage the Diwalwal reservation. This was subsequently renamed Philippine Mining Development Corporation (PMDC).

Under the auspices of PMDC, Arroyo divided up Diwalwal into three sections. The first she made a reservation for the tribal populations who claimed ancestral domain to the mountain, effectively moving them off all gold lodes. The second she declared to be for the use of large scale mining corporations, and the third for the continued use of small-scale mining.

The small-scale mining corporations were well-enough connected to be a political force that Arroyo had to treat warily. The PMDC then declared that it would be accepting bids for mining in the third area from both small and large-scale mines, which were to work together 'in partnership.'

In 2008, it emerged that Arroyo had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Chinese state corporation ZTE for the development of Diwalwal. As with so many other facets of the Philippine economy, Arroyo was orienting the political and economic ties of the Philippines toward the rising global power of China.

Scandals erupted around Arroyo's deals with ZTE; the small-scale mining corporations protested the inclusion of massive mining firms in their region of Diwalwal. The bidding for the development of Diwalwal was repeatedly postponed.

The final postponement of bidding occurred in May 2010. When the PMDC reconvened, Arroyo was no longer president. Newly-elected President Aquino

replaced the PMDC board and began taking bids for the development of Diwalwal. The new bids come from US based corporations, and from Manny Pangilinan, a billionaire political ally of Aquino.

The miners of Diwalwal continued to eke out an existence on the slopes of the mountain. Landslides were commonplace. The communities established sentries to warn residents of impending collapses. On the night of the landslide, residents struggled to wake and rescue sleeping families of miners just before the mountain came tumbling down, burying bunkhouses, ballmills, and mine shafts.

Aquino has seized on the tragedy to attempt to evict the small-scale mining operations and to supplant them with large-scale multinational interests. He has evicted and banned all residents from the region pending further development. The mainstream press has backed him to the hilt, blaming the greedy, reckless miners for living there. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* has been particularly pernicious about this; its owner Sandy Prieto is married to Philip Romualdez, president of the Chamber of Mines, and the leading advocate of foreign mine ownership in the country.

The Communist Party of the Philippines issued a statement on the landslide, condemning the entrance of large-scale multinational mining into Diwalwal. It defended the rights and interests of small-scale miners. What the CPP deliberately covered-up was the fact that small-scale mining is owned by corporations of local capitalists; those buried on the mountainside of Diwalwal worked in and around their mines.

In keeping with their line of the 'bloc of four classes' and the progressive role of the national bourgeoisie, the CPP is defending the class interests of a collection of rapacious and brutal thugs, the exploiters of the very victims that the CPP claims to be honoring.



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